DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 174 CS 210 872

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TITLE It Kind of Makes You Think: Writing Books That Stimulate Thought.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (77th, Los Angeles, CA, November 20-25, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Literature; Authors; *Childrens Literature; Critical Thinking; Didacticism; Fantasy; *Literature Appreciation; Novels; Reader Text Relationship; Reading Materials; *Reading Processes; Science Fiction; *Writing for Publication

ABSTRACT

Noting that books for children must be just as entertaining, if not more so, than television or film in order to maintain young readers' attention, this paper discusses combining entertainment with didacticism in children's and adolescent literature. The first part of the paper offers a writer's reflections on the experience of writing science fiction/fantasy for youth and on the wish writers have to motivate young people to think while reading. The second part of the paper expands upon this idea and discusses the advantage writers of science fiction and fantasy have in motivating young people to think, using as an example the book, "Is There Life on a Plastic Planet?" The section goes on to suggest that whether readers arrive at "right answers" to questions the books raise is unimportant in comparison with the creative thinking involved in suggesting answers. The final section suggests that ideas that might sound "preachy" in other books attract and fascinate readers when placed in the context of science fiction and fantasy. (JC)

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IT KIND OF MAKES YOU THINK

WRITING BOOKS THAT STIMULATE THOUGHT

Mildred Ames

Early this year when Jill Smilow of Scholastic asked me to be part of a panel called SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY WORTH TEACHING TO TEENS, I immediately said "I don't write books to teach. I write books to entertain." The moment I finished talking to her I realized how wrong I was. Oh, sure, I write books to entertain. In this day and age, with so much competition from television for the attention of children, a writer had darned well better entertain. After all, books rate a low second alongside the tube.

Although I was already aware of that dismal fact, it was really brought home to me recently by a friend of mine who is a school librarian. She told me that she had convinced one of the students, a boy, to read my book, ANNA TO THE INFINITE POWER. He had already seen the movie that had been made from the book and like most movies that come from novels, all sorts of liberties were taken with the story. Later, when my friend asked this boy what he thought of the book, he shook his head and said, "She got it all wrong." So much for the power of film.

Yes, I try to write books that entertain, but I also try to write books that teach. All fiction writers for young people do. Most of us have lived a lot longer than the kids we write for, and we like to think that we just might have picked up a thing or two along the way that could be of worth to youngsters. (After

all, adolescence wasn't invented just last year--although I'm not so sure about the term--in my day that season of life was called "the awkward age.") But when I say teach, I don't mean in the didactic sense. One plus one may equal two to other people, but to writers of fiction, one plus one usually equals eleven. We hope to give our young readers some new insight into life that may have taken us decades to learn. And children don't seem to resent this. Instead, they ask, "How did you know how I feel?"

The first book I published for children was IS THERE LIFE ON A PLASTIC PLANET? Just before it came out, a seventh grade girl who wanted to aim for a writing career, asked if she could interview me as a part of a school project. Naturally I said, yes, and when we finished talking, I asked her if she'd like to take home the galleys to PLASTIC PLANET and read them, just as a professional writer would. For me, it was a chance to get a child's, rather than an adult's, reaction to the novel. Well, take them home she did and later she reported to me with all the glowing appreciation that writers live for, and which, we hate to admit, means very little coming from a captive audience. What did mean something to me though was her answer when I asked what she'd gotten out of the story. She mulled that around for a bit, then said, "It kind of makes you think."

It kind of makes you think.

Whether or not she was sincere, she had touched upon my real purpose in writing books for young people. Oh, sure, we writers want to entertain our readers. As one old-time editor used to put it, "Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait." I hope to

do all that for my young readers and one thing more--make 'em think!

That's what's so wonderful about science-fiction and fantasy. In both genres a writer can present big and important issues in a context that's imaginative and entertaining. And in a way that gets a reader thinking.

In IS THERE LIFE ON A PLASTIC PLANET, Hollis, an eleven-year-old, has the chance to change places with a look-alike doll-robot. While the robot does all the things that Hollis hates, like going to school, dealing with people she doesn't like, and taking ballet lessons, Hollis spends the time playing and eating and eating and playing, until, of course, as the robot (or machine) becomes more like a human, Hollis (the human) becomes more like a robot or a machine.

Now no child is going to read that book and, when his teacher asks him what it's about, say, "The story means that as technology takes over more and more aspects of human life, people run the risk of becoming dehumanized." But that doesn't mean that the issue doesn't get through to kids at their own intellectual level. It does.

As one boy put it in a letter to me: "Someday I just might like to have a doll that could do everything people do and it would take my place in school. But I would not like it to think its home was my home like it did in the story."

And as another boy put it: "I learned that I should never have a contest against a doll because the doll will win."

Although they may express it differently from adults, they do seem to get the idea.

To set readers thinking, I sometimes use a writer's trick that seems to bring some interesting results. I leave an important aspect of the book unexplained to force the discerning reader to create along with me. For instance, in PLASTIC PLANET I never tell whose sinister hand has fashioned the doll-robots. Some readers are so frustrated they write me and demand that I tell them who made the dolls. When I do, I suspect they feel very let down because how much more exciting it would be if I could say, "The villain is really Dr. No!" instead of,"We are the villains--our technology, our society."

In ANNA TO THE INFINITE POWER, Anna starts her life in the book as a brilliant but totally self-centered twelve-year-old. When she discovers that she is a clone she is so shook up she not only has to come to terms with her identity but with her lacks as a human being. Michaela, her music teacher, helps her earn the soul that, until now, is missing from her make-up.

In the book I never explain Michaela. She has a shadowy presence that I hope will set readers thinking. Of course some of them accept her as merely a nosy but helpful teacher, yet there are always others who look deeper. I had a letter signed by five young people who wanted to know who Michaela was. "We had a few guesses of our own," they said. "One of our guesses was that she was God." Now that may sound pretty far-out, but it really is perceptive. I intended Michaela to be Anna's good angel, a religious symbol who helps Anna develop the spiritual side of her nature.

The important thing is not that readers come up with the

right answer, because often, there isn't one. The important thing is that the unexplained often has the power to compel them to examine an intriguing situation and come up with, if not answers, an awareness that will stay with them, perhaps forever. After all, if you explain everything, you take away the magic.

I've written only three books that could be termed either science fiction or fantasy, or a combination of both. PLASTIC PLANET, for instance, is called science-fiction fantasy. I think of it as fantasy. Apparently one of my readers did too. At the end of his letter telling me he thought I'd done a pretty good job with the book, he asked, "Do you write anything besides fascinations?"

I wanted to say, "Oh, I sincerely hope not."

I've really enjoyed writing science-fiction and fantasy more than realistic fiction because they seem to free the mind and the imagination. We all know that no one has made a robot that can take the place of a human being and fool everyone into the bargain, but what fun to play with the idea and follow it to its probable conclusion. The same with clones. When I wrote Anna, I had to put myself in her place and try to deal with what a terrible identity crisis such a person would have, not knowing who she was--was she herself or was she the person she was cloned from? Who was her mother and father? In science-fiction and fantasy, writers can present ethical dilemmas that readers would deplore as moralistic if they came to them through more realistic fiction.

PLASTIC PLANET AND ANNA, at least lean toward science-fiction, but my book, THE SILVER LINK, THE SILKEN TIE depends

purely on fantasy to resolve the rather heavy problems of the main characters. Tim and Felice share the same fantasy-survival experience which sets both of them on the road toward less guilt-ridden lives.

Again I've tried to use an idea that may well become an important part of the world these young readers grow up in. Essentially, the story is about mind control--about the different ways of getting inside people's brains--sometimes with their knowledge and sometimes without, sometimes for good and sometimes for evil. I hoped the book would make kids consider the issue and draw their own conclusions.

Science-fiction and fantasy. They're almost writers' tools. Often they allow us to deal with subjects that, in a more realistic context, might be called preachy, but if we place our stories in outer space or in fantasyland, readers become intrigued rather than turned off. Fantasy lets us deal with the inner world, science-fiction with the outer. Either way, we, as writers, use these fiction forms to examine important issues and the human state. If we can entertain and, at the same time, stimulate young people to think, then our cup runneth over. After all, in our work, we are not trying to duplicate life but to illuminate it. And if we do a good job, we may find that we never write anything but "fascinations."